

The '71 Interview: David Levy

On Dartmouth, Kemeny, Information Overload, His Valedictory

The Newsletter caught up recently with David, our Valedictorian. Following is an edited transcript.

Why did you pick Dartmouth?

I went to Stuyvesant High School, which is one of New York's famous math and science high schools. I didn't even apply to MIT because I didn't want an extension of high school. I wanted to go where I would get a broader, liberal education.

Dartmouth and MIT had the cutting edge digital technologies of the time, called time-sharing, and that was part of the reason I went to Dartmouth.

I loved Dartmouth academically and intellectually -- the small class sizes, the great professors. And it was unbelievable that I got to be one of the kids running Kiewit, the computer center, while I was still a teenager. I got to work with John Kemeny.

You know, I was an oddball at Dartmouth. I was a nerdy kid from New

York City. I had gone to Stuyvesant. I couldn't do anything athletic to save my life. I think that set the tone for those four years, and also contributed to some of the frustration I gave voice to in my valedictory. I was having a great time intellectually, but I was hopeless socially and didn't know how to meet girls.

Socially things changed my senior year. I did finally have a serious girlfriend. That really changed things for the better.

What was John Kemeny like, as a teacher, as a person?

I never spent time with him socially, but I took math classes from him and worked with him at

Kiewit. He was remarkable, one of the two best teachers I've ever had. He would take the class through a math proof. And at the end the class would laugh, a laugh of delight. It was beautiful. At times I did talk with him one on one. He had the most remarkable concentration. It was the first time I ever experienced talking with somebody whose concentration was so strong. At that moment, you felt that you were his entire world, which was itself quite wonderful.

And then, around my valedictory. Remember, he was president.

You showed him your address ahead of time?

I had shown my valedictory to the administration.



David Levy at Dartmouth.

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There were no surprises. Kemeny had a talk with me. He said 'I don't agree with what you are saying, but I showed it to my daughter and it meant a lot to her. You are trying to say something here.' And he was very respectful. It was controversial, of course.

Years later, in the

preface to my book, "Scrolling Forward," I briefly talked about the experience. "I was mad at society and at the elitism of my school. I was unhappy with my life, and detested being told that the undergraduate years were the best years of my life. I was searching for meaning." Letters poured in, from all over the country. Some were quite hostile, and with good reason. One alum referred to it as "pissing in the champagne."

What did you do next?

I graduated in June of '71. I decided not to go to graduate school right away. I spent part of the year after graduation in France. I spent January through July (in Lyon, France) teaching and helping to

build a simple time-sharing system on a French mini-computer. I had a blast. I got to drink Beaujolais, exercise my French and do some programming.

In 1972 you entered Stanford.

I entered in fall of '72 to study computer science with a specialization in artificial intelligence (AI). But as I got more involved in the AI of that period I became more uncomfortable with some of its assumptions about what it meant to be human. Kemeny didn't think that AI was the future of computing. In some ways he was right on the mark. He thought a more symbiotic relationship between computer and person was the better direction. While at Stanford I was lucky enough to be a research intern at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (Xerox PARC) when the personal computer was being invented. It was a very exciting, electric place.

But...

Even before I finished the PhD, I had begun questioning the hard core techie side. I was searching for a more embodied and contemplative way of being in the world. I decided that on finishing my PhD, I wanted to study calligraphy and bookbinding. The only program in the English speaking world was in London, at the Roehampton Institute. I spent two wonderful years there, but at the end, I realized I wasn't going to become a full-time calligrapher.

So what happened next?

I moved back to California and took a position at a Silicon Valley startup, Symantec. After six months there, I realized that the eighty-hour work weeks weren't going to sustain me or my contemplative aspirations. I returned to Xerox PARC and spent the next 20 years in a wonderful, interdisciplinary environment, with anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers, in a genuine, honest-to-God think tank.

And you began contemplating information overload and such.

In 1995 I wrote my first paper on that subject. The title was, "I'm Not Here Right Now to Take Your Call."

And then in 2000 I moved to my first academic job,

at the University of Washington.

You have thought, written and spoken deeply on the digital age and the effects of email.

A long time ago I choose email as an example to look at, because people were standing around the virtual water cooler complaining about all the emails they had to deal with. I started looking at the problematic side of it and trying to understand where the problems came from and what we could do about it. I began to see email as a manifestation of our accelerating, out-of-control culture. And I began to explore, in my research and teaching, what a more contemplative response would look like.

Home: Seattle

Professor, Information School, University of Washington

Valedictorian at Dartmouth, Class of 1971

PhD in Computer Science, Stanford University 1979

Xerox Palo Alto Research Center until 1999

Author: Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age (Arcade, 2001)

How do you handle the digital overload?

I do take a day off a week (from digital communication.) My wife is a rabbi, a Reform rabbi at a congregation here in Seattle. We have our own Sabbath from Friday evening until Saturday evening, and as part of that I stay off line.

What about Dartmouth?

The first time was when my niece Sarah graduated from Dartmouth, just last year. Captain of the tennis team, in a sorority, a very different experience than I had. I was not sure what it was going to be like, after more than 30 years of not visiting. And I found it very easy. I had to pinch myself a little bit, walking across the campus. It actually felt natural and comfortable to be there, after all these years. Then I was invited back this fall in my professional capacity. To give a lecture at Dartmouth entitled "No Time to Think."

See the video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9x-L832M-uw

That was a wonderful experience as well. I do feel that I am re-engaging, and feel a fondness for and gratitude for the place that allowed me to learn so much. ■